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Public opinion and sex hygiene

New York City

1913

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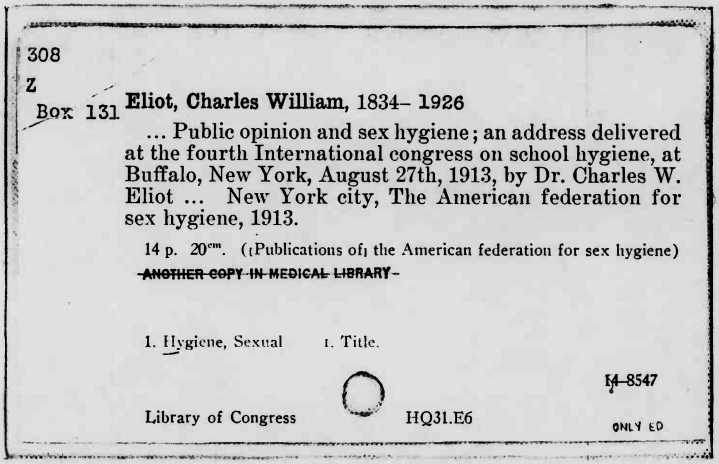

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The American Federation for Sex Hygiene

PUBLIC OPINION AND SEX HYGIENE

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Box 131

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON SCHOOL HYGIENE, AT BUFFALO, NEW YORK, AUGUST 27TH, 1913

BY

DR. CHARLES W. ELIOT

President Emeritus of Harvard University
President of The American Federation for Sex Hygiene

American Social Hygiene Association
(INCORPORATED)
105 West 40th Street
New York City.

Issued by

THE AMERICAN FEDERATION
FOR SEX HYGIENE

Tilden Building, 105 West Fortieth Street

New York City

1913

The American Federation for Sex Hygiene

PUBLIC OPINION AND SEX HYGIENE

An Address Delivered at The Fourth International Congress on School Hygiene, at Buffalo, New York, August 27th, 1913

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PUBLIC OPINION AND SEX HYGIENE

By Dr. Charles W. Eliot, Cambridge, Mass.
President Emeritus of Harvard University,
President of The American Federation for Sex Hygiene.

During my somewhat long, active life I have never seen such a change of public opinion among thoughtful people as has taken place among them within the last ten years on the subject of sex hygiene, using that term in its broadest sense.

The policy of silence on all the functions and relations of sex, whether normal or morbid, was almost universally accepted for centuries by physicians and clergymen, and in family life. In the Protestant denominations of the Christian church the normal processes of procreation and birth were associated with the supposed fall of man and his total depravity. In the Catholic church the offices of a priest were necessary for the mother and new-born infant by way of purification; and the perversions of the sexual passion were to be dealt with only by the priest in the confessional. The miserable victims of the venereal diseases were excluded from all hospitals and dispensaries, or were treated by compassionate physicians only by stealth. Venereal diseases were regarded exclusively as diseases of sin and shame, until their frequent communication to wholly innocent persons had been demonstrated within recent years.

Certain rather recent medical discoveries have contributed to the extraordinary change in public opinion. When blindness in the new-born was traced to gonorrhea in the mother, a potent cause of the crowding of blind asylums was thus brought to light. Insanity and general paresis were in many cases traced back to syphilis, and an explana-

tion was thus given of the increase of insanity in civilized communities. It became known to the medical profession, and later to many unprofessional persons, that the consequences of gonorrhea were almost as bad as those of syphilis, in regard to the infection of innocent persons and the destruction of family happiness. Quite recently a treatment for syphilis has been discovered which has proved satisfactory in many thousands of cases, although the permanence of the cure cannot yet be confidently affirmed. It has been proved that by persistent treatment gonorrhea can apparently be permanently cured in a large proportion of cases. In obscure disorders the Wassermann test for syphilis gives the physician, who is trying to make the diagnosis, on the one hand a strong indication of the presence of a serious complication, or on the other of its absence. As a guide to treatment either determination is invaluable. The same test can supply evidence that a cure has been effected. It will also probably furnish in time trustworthy statistics concerning the prevalence of syphilis in the community at large, statistics greatly needed, because the previous guesses and estimates on that subject and the results of some recent applications of the test to considerable numbers of public hospital patients are disquieting. To refuse to treat venereal diseases in hospitals and dispensaries, now that we know they can be effectively treated, does not seem tolerable or possible in any humane and instructed community. The treatment of other contagious diseases is adequately provided for. Shall these most destructive of all contagious diseases be exempted from registration, isolation during activity, and treatment at either public or private expense adequate to the protection of the community? If the community is to be protected, however, the policy of silence and the concealment of venereal cases must be abandoned by the medical profession and by boards of health. The duty of the medical profession to the family as the best of human institutions and to the public health as the foundation of the common efficiency and happiness, must

qualify the duty of the physician as the recipient of his patient's confidence.

The recent medical discoveries to which I have referred raise important ethical questions. Will the fact that syphilis can apparently be cured in many instances increase sexual immorality? Will the fact that a few dissolute men and women escape venereal diseases, and the further fact that there are antiseptic precautions which diminish somewhat the dangers of licentiousness, make young men readier to encounter the dangers of sin? These are questions which only experience can fully answer.

The Navy Department reports publicly that the crews of the sixteen battleships that went around the world returned with a better record in respect to venereal diseases than those of any earlier American expedition. It is clearly better for the community as a whole that the diseases consequent on vice should be reduced to the lowest possible terms both by cure and by prevention. The sum of human misery from licentiousness, when followed without restriction or repair, by the diseases consequent upon vice, is greater than it would be if the consequent diseases were effectively contended against with all the means now available for mitigation and cure; and the hope that the race can maintain itself against the evils of artificial living, unhealthy herding, and commercialized vice will be strengthened by active and incessant war on venereal disease.

Public opinion has been moved strongly toward the subject of sex hygiene because of the many signs of physical deterioration among the civilized nations which suffer from the eager rush out of the country into the city, from the factory system, and from alcoholism and the sexual vices. Many thoughtful persons are anxious about the diminishing size of young men at the age of admission to the national armies, the rapid reduction within fifty years of the size of the average family, the common inability of women to nurse their babies, the terrible infant mortality in cities, the alleged increasing number of physically or

mentally defective children, and the increasing proportion in civilized communities of persons, young, mature, or old who are practically unable to earn their livelihood. The humanitarian policies in regard to the treatment of the defective, the incompetent, and the criminal classes seem to tend to increase the burdens carried by the normal and industrious portion of the population; and these burdens react on the vigor and happiness of the normal people. The increase of liberty for all classes of the community seems to promote the rapid breeding of the defective, irresponsible, and vicious.

The new interest in sex hygiene is not due, however, only to speculations on the durability of modern civilization or on that of the white race. Political philosophers and biologists naturally take a strong interest in those large problems; but the individual young man or woman has a narrower sentiment on this subject, though one quite as intense. The young people have lately heard for the first time what the risks of marriage are; what the physical enemies of happy family life are; how the different standard of chastity for men and women has worked during the slow development of the society now called civilized. With these young people the problem becomes an intensely personal one. "How can I best regulate my own conduct in order to win the normal satisfactions of family life? How can I be protected from the ignorance or sinfulness of associates? In short, how can I steer a safe course through the swirls and tumults of the sexual passion, which seems to be a principal source not only of the normal satisfactions and delights of human life, but also of its worst anxieties and afflictions?" Intelligent fathers and mothers feel a new sort of duty towards their children—the duty of protecting them from vicious allurements and giving them in due time knowledge of good and evil in sex relations. Teachers in public schools see before them a deplorable proportion of children who have bad inheritances, both physical and mental, and who live in bad environments; and sharing the new freedom in

the discussion of social problems, they are eager to be told how they can contribute to the arrest and prevention of these miserable tendencies. Churches are taking a new interest in the questions which arise out of unhappy marriage and easy divorce. Many persons who get a smattering on eugenics are eager for legislation to make marriage conditional on bodily and mental health, and to keep in confinement the feeble-minded, the alcoholic, and the insane not only till they are of age, but till they are incapable of breeding their like. Some knowledge of social hygiene and eugenics has led many persons to advocate hastily prepared legislation as a panacea for evils which terribly afflict modern communities, and yet are very ancient. Such is the genesis and such the immediate outcome of the new and widespread interest in sex hygiene.

The most important question before this American Federation for Sex Hygiene is the question—What forces can now be put into play against the formidable evils which gravely threaten family life, human happiness, civilization in general, and the very life of the race? Something must be done. Christianity, democracy, and humanitarianism have all failed, thus far, to cope with these evils which are sapping the vitality of civilized society. What can be done? It is clear that no one force or agency is to be exclusively relied on. All the uplifting forces of society must be simultaneously enlisted in this cause,—state, church, school, college, industrial and charitable corporations, all productive industries, and both preventive and remedial medicine. The attack must be directed against the three principal causes of the present evil conditions,—first, against lust in men; secondly, against the weakness, dependence, mental deficiency, and lack of moral principle of the women who supply the demands of men; thirdly, against the greed and depravity of the wretches who maintain a profitable commerce out of this licentious demand and supply.

The struggle against lust in men must bring into play a variety of defensive agencies, such as full occupation for

body and mind, manly sports, ambition and energy in the earning of the livelihood, timely knowledge of the good and the evil in sex relations, temperance in both food and drink, and deliverance from mischievous transmitted beliefs, such as belief in the harmlessness of gonorrhea or in the necessity of sexual indulgence for the maintenance of health and vigor in men. For the giving of the information which all young men need a variety of agencies must be utilized. The best source of the information which the young man needs is the parent—the mother in childhood, the father later; but inasmuch as many parents are too ignorant to give this information, it is indispensable that schools, churches, Christian Associations, and the various kinds of clubs maintained for good social purposes should all be utilized. The public press, too,—or that part of it which has moral purposes and a sense of responsibility—must lend its aid, and the policy of silence must be abandoned in favor of a policy of high-minded and reserved exposition. It must be made impossible for either young men or young women to plead ignorance as their excuse when they fall into moral and physical degradation. The general policy in thus employing all available defensive agencies will be the exclusion of evil thoughts and acts by the incessant suggestion and practice of pure and useful thinking and acting. Does any one say that these are slow-acting forces which will be long in bringing about hygienic sex relations? True; but must it not be a long labor to modify towards purity and chivalrous gentleness the strongest of the animal instincts of man? It is not likely that any short and easy road can be found to the redemption of society from centuries-old licentiousness in males. All the more reason for entering at once on the best roads to be found that lead in the desired direction. It is obvious that most of the forces to be employed are educational, to be applied as widely as possible not only in childhood but throughout life.

The second attack must be directed against the lack of moral and mental stamina in girls and young women

whose inheritances have been low, and whose environment has been dull and miserable. Prostitution is voluntarily resorted to by some responsible women whose propensities are naturally bad; but the great majority of prostitutes are physical, mental, or moral defectives in the strictest sense of that word. It is the interest of all such defectives and of society at large that they be first discovered in their families, or at school, or in the churches or social settlements, or in hospitals and infirmaries, and then segregated and confined under wholesome conditions, where they can not be seduced to a vile life or be abandoned even for an hour to their own imperfect self-control. Here is a great service that the public schools can render to society, and here lies a strong argument in favor of the extension of attendance at school beyond the age of thirteen or fourteen, which is now the limit of school life for a great majority of American children. Family, school, church, and all good social organizations should steadily contend against indolence, love of excitement, self-indulgence, and luxurious tendencies in girls, should prevent the depression or joylessness of extreme poverty, and should provide and cultivate systematically both helpful work and healthful play for all sorts of girls and young women. Orphaned and unprotected girls should be always the special care of benevolent organizations or friendly societies. Courts and police authorities should reinforce and assist parents and school authorities to control, before it is too late, girls that manifest vicious propensities. The best control for such girls is, of course, that of a loving home; but in the absence of that best control the community itself should exercise the next best in its own defense. Again, we see that the forces which must be brought into play in attacking the second cause, or source, of licentiousness are mostly educational, and therefore slow-working.

The third assault which society should conduct against licentiousness may be undertaken with prompt decision and with expectation of effecting rapid improvement. This is the assault on commercialized vice. There need be no hesi-

tation in attacking with all the powers of the law the men and women who pander to men by seducing or compelling young women to the horrible existence of the prostitute, owned or leased by a dealer in the gratification of lust, and provide shelter and facilities for the worst of human vices. In that shameful business much intelligence and shrewdness and much capital are employed, and much money is made. Some of the money made is freely used to secure immunity, or periods of immunity, from prosecution in the courts. This iniquitous commerce should be put an end to by vigorous action under existing laws. No third party should be allowed to make any profit out of licentiousness. No brokers or commission merchants in vice should be allowed to exist in a civilized community, and no real estate owner should be allowed to use it himself, or lease it to others, for immoral purposes. But one may say, "The segregation and regulation of brothels are policies which have come down through unnumbered centuries in many nations and under all the great religions of the world. Are we to attempt the uprooting of such ancient policies of toleration and license?" I answer, "Yes, we are;" because those ancient policies have everywhere failed to protect the human race from evils which in the long run will work its destruction. Former generations were not sure of that failure. This generation knows it. Former generations had no adequate means of contending against the diseases which in the human race accompany the perversions and excesses of the sex instincts. We possess these means. Earlier generations had not appropriated the idea of government "of the people, for the people, and by the people." For us the interests of the mass override the interests of the individual, particularly when the alleged interests of the individual are corrupting and degrading.

The policy of segregation in defined quarters has not been carried out successfully in any place in the world, not even in Japan, where the policy is traditional and has come down through many centuries and where the conditions of

prostitution are in some respects less horrible than in any Christian country. In all the cities which have long practised the policy of segregation scattered vice exists in great amount outside the recognized quarters. The regulation of prostitutes through medical inspection and certification is a recognized failure in every country where it has been long carried on. The inspection is perfunctory and quite incapable of supplying evidence that no disease exists in the persons inspected. The certificate issued by the inspector is founded on no good evidence when it is issued, and may be made absolutely false within a few minutes of its issue. In other words, segregation is never even approximately complete, and it would not diminish licentiousness if it were complete. On the contrary, it supplies facilities for vice. Regulation has no significant effect to reduce venereal disease, although it accomplishes in some rather small proportion the temporary segregation of active cases; and it increases licentiousness, because young men are deluded into thinking that the worthless certificates mean diminished risk of contracting disease.

It is said, in opposition to the suppression of brothels and in favor of the toleration of vice in special quarters of a town or city, that it is better to permit vice, public and regulated, in certain parts of a city than to drive vice into secrecy and spread it all through the residential quarters. The reply to this argument is, that there is a large gain to the community as a whole whenever any vice or wrong practice is driven into secrecy and its gratification made difficult or inconvenient instead of easy. It is one of the lessons of the long struggle against alcoholism that great gain comes from making the use of alcoholic liquors private instead of public, even if the total consumption of liquor in the community be not much reduced. It has been demonstrated that the policy of no-license for saloons diminishes drunkenness in the community which adopts it. The same is true of gambling houses and the gambling habit. Public toleration and ease of access to the means of gratifying any

vicious habit increase the number of victims. It is also said against the proposal to suppress brothels that criminal assaults on girls and women will increase to a formidable extent in any community which adopts such a policy. Fortunately the social resistance to assaults on women is now strong enough to enforce against all such criminals any penalties likely to be deterrent. Asexualization, or castration of the criminal, in addition to whatever other penalty the nature of the assault may indicate, will be demanded by public opinion, if either shall prove to be effective to prevent the crime. Here and there, and from time to time, police authorities in large cities have proved that it is possible to suppress brothels. It remains for public opinion to demand the execution of existing laws and of any new laws which experience may show to be needed for the suppression of commercialized vice. One common practice of the police and the courts will need to be changed. These authorities now attack prostitution chiefly by arresting and punishing the women concerned; they should also punish the men concerned, for they are the primary offenders. It should be one of the chief functions of this Federation and of all kindred bodies to educate public opinion on this subject of suppression in place of toleration. Much progress has already been made in this direction, and the advance of medical science and especially of preventive medicine is contributing every year new weapons for this warfare.

The interest of many thinking people in the subject of eugenics is closely allied to interest in sex hygiene; but zeal for wise breeding is apparently leading to some hasty or ill-considered legislation. The existing legislation to limit selection in marriage is evidence of a wise recognition of the dangers in continuing stocks burdened with inheritable weaknesses, and is so far welcome; but not all the proposed prohibitions can be justified by biological science at its present stage. The educated public have much to learn with regard to the proper mating of persons who have some nervous defect. Such persons should mate with those whose

ancestry has no such defect. Although it is undesirable that feeble-minded, epileptic, or insane persons should have children, yet if such a person mates wisely, and the children of such union again wisely, the progeny of the third generation will probably be quite as free from nervous defect as the general population is. Again, the reproduction of the feeble-minded will not necessarily be diminished by laws which prevent them from marrying. Such persons ordinarily have very little self-control, and if left free will have children whether married or not. The laws against undesirable marriages need to be revised in most of the American states; and the public needs to be convinced that no such law can eradicate the evil. Nothing but the compulsory seclusion of all defectives under humane housing, training, and labor conditions will accomplish the eugenic object of the community. Laws which provide that candidates for marriage must be free from syphilis or gonorrhea do good, provided that proper provision be made for the certificate to that effect from a trustworthy physician appointed by the state. The appointment for this duty of an adequate number of physicians by the state boards of health would give a new and important function to these boards. The maintenance of such a staff, furnished with all the means of applying adequate tests in doubtful cases, would be somewhat expensive, but this expense might perhaps be covered in part by a moderate addition to the fee for a marriage license. Each physician would probably require the aid of a man and a woman competent to inquire into the family histories of the applicants for a marriage license.

It is probable that much public instruction will have to be given through newspapers, magazines, lectures, and discussions in men's clubs and women's clubs before sound and effective eugenic legislation can be placed on the statute books. Again we find that public progress in relation to sex hygiene and eugenics is to be procured chiefly through educational methods. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the processes adopted for diffusing sound

knowledge about the normal and the morbid sex relations, the dangers of licentiousness, safe mating with a view of healthy progeny, the prevention of the reproduction of defectives, the destruction of commerce in vice, and the prevention of venereal contagions should all be carried on plainly but delicately, without exaggeration or morbid suggestion, without interference with parental rights or religious convictions, and in general in a pure, high-minded, disinterested way. The pioneering part of this work must be done by voluntary associations, as is usual in social reforms; but it should be the constant aim of these private organizations to enlist gradually the public authorities in this vast undertaking, and to transfer to the public treasury as fast as possible the support of all those parts of the work which experience proves to be of sure and permanent public advantage. The pioneering in regard to both research and practical measures will probably continue for many years to be the work of voluntary associations.

Publications of
The American Federation for Sex Hygiene

The Teaching of Sex Hygiene. By Prince A. Morrow, M.D. A reprint. 1912. $1.50 per 100 copies, postpaid.

Report of the Special Committee on the Matter and Methods of Sex Education. By Thomas M. Balliet, Dean of the School of Pedagogy, New York University; Maurice A. Bigelow, Professor of Biology, Teachers College, Columbia University; and Prince A. Morrow, M.D. 1912. $3.00 per 100 copies, postpaid.

Catalog of the Publications of the Constituent Societies. 1913. $1.50 per 100 copies, postpaid.

Sex Instruction as a Phase of Social Education. By Maurice A. Bigelow. A reprint. $3.00 per 100 copies, postpaid.

Public Opinion and Sex Hygiene. By Dr. Charles W. Eliot. A reprint. $3.00 per 100 copies, postpaid.

Report of the Sex Education Sessions of the Fourth International Congress on School Hygiene, and of the Annual Meeting of the Federation, Buffalo, N. Y., August, 1913. Single copies, paper 25 cents; cloth 50 cents, postpaid.

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